

Mississippi Education: Money Alone is Not the Answer

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MEC Hobnob
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Importance of Education

Education is Mississippi's number one economic development and quality of life issue.

Education Events

Last year I called together Mississippi business leaders in a Job Creation Summit to examine ways to spur job growth - many of you were in attendance. In that Summit tort reform, workforce development reform and no tax hikes were all identified as key goals to economic growth and all were achieved during the last legislative session. I want to use the same participatory process we used in our Job Creation Summit to help shape policy in Mississippi education. I recently sponsored three education conferences across the state to focus our attention on areas where we can improve:

-- last month I established the Governor's Teacher Advisory Council, and nearly 200 classroom teachers gathered

in Jackson to discuss issues such as incentive pay, career advancement, and other national education reform ideas;

-- recognizing that every child must be ready to learn, we then held an early childhood education summit in Tupelo. More than 350 childcare providers, Head Start representatives, and policy makers examined ways our state could collaborate to expand Head Start and introduce more educational content into private childcare centers; and

-- last week, the National Governors Association, The Teaching Commission, and the National Conference of State Legislatures sponsored a Policy Institute on Teacher Quality in Biloxi. Education policy advisors, legislators, and other education leaders from across the country shared their thoughts on recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas.

Mississippi Education Summit

This education focus will culminate in tomorrow's 2004 Mississippi Education Summit. I invite you all to attend. It is an opportunity for you to play a role in shaping an education system we can all be proud of. It will be one of the largest education events Mississippi has seen in decades with national education policy experts, state education leaders, teachers,

businesspeople and state elected officials together to examine Mississippi's approach to education.

Mississippi Can Do Better in Education

Unfortunately, despite some marginal improvement in some areas, Mississippi schools as a whole struggle to perform; Mississippi test scores still rank last; and in some cases our education system is not viewed favorably by industries looking to locate facilities. There is no question that we can do better in educating our children. I want to change the mindset in Mississippi to expect more from our schools than just an "adequate education."

Past Education Debates

Despite the obvious problems, education debates in Mississippi in recent years have only been about one component of education: money. The 1992 one-cent sales tax increase and the 1997 Adequate Education Act were mainly about how big a check was going to be cut to education. Mississippi has about 460,000 K-12 schoolchildren. That's roughly 2% fewer students than we had 10 years ago. However, our level of funding to serve fewer students has actually gone up 57% over those same 10 years. K-12 education in Mississippi last year received \$77 million more than the year before and

saw yet another installment of a massive, across-the-board teacher pay raise – which I supported. Despite this historic funding level, that appropriation was called an “anti-education cut” that would cripple our schools. Sadly, this is how we discuss education in Mississippi today.

Money Alone is Not the Answer

Funding education is certainly important. But is the level of funding all Mississippi has to say about education? Money buys textbooks and buses, but once those are bought is that it? Mississippi already spends more on education than any other budget item. If money alone is the answer, why aren't our schools any better? Some of Mississippi's schools who have the lowest base student costs routinely outperform schools with more abundant resources. I wish that money was the only obstacle to Mississippi leading the nation in test scores – it would make our job as easy as writing a check. But that is not the case.

Mississippi is Forgetting the Fundamentals

Mississippi has been so focused on the funding of education in recent years that we have forgotten the fundamentals of education:

- We should think about evaluating what we're doing in our schools and whether it works;

- We should think about asking more questions about the money we already spend in education;

- We should think about having less administration and more instruction in our schools;

- We should think about paying our teachers based on performance;

- We should think about better utilizing our resources in education;

- We should think about reducing the amount of paperwork our teachers have to complete so they have more time to actually teach; and

- We should think about finding the best practices in Mississippi schools and imitating them around the state.

Here We Go Again...Raising Taxes for Education

Unfortunately, instead of having a statewide discussion about these fundamentals we end up wasting year after year

debating dollar signs. Next year looks to be no different. With the state trying to rebound economically and climb out of a budget hole, there are those who will be advocating in January that we raise your taxes for education yet again. You may be familiar with that argument. It is the same argument we heard when liquor was legalized in the 60s and when gambling was legalized in the 90s. The rationale goes something like this: just raise this one tax for education and we'll have the best schools in the nation. How many times have we heard that, and how many times has it turned out to be so wrong. I hope we don't fall for it again. If Mississippi history has taught us anything it is that tax hikes don't make our children any smarter -- they just make some people feel better.

Get Involved and Ask Questions

We have tried it their way and the result has been being 50th year after year after year. Let's try a different approach and reach for #1. If we cannot outspend other states in education it is time for us to start outsmarting them. I encourage each of you to roll up your sleeves and join me in lifting our schools to a competitive level. Get involved with your local schools, ask tough questions and provide assistance where you can. And if the only answer you get from your school leadership is "more money" - ask them if that is all they have to say about education - and tell them we can do better.

Join us at the *Mississippi Education Summit* Tomorrow

Please join us at the Mississippi Education Summit, tomorrow 9 to 4, at the Downtown Marriott. We need your input. Just go to governorbarbour.com/mes to register. Thank you.